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Ruth St. Denis and India's Dance Renaissance

Uttara Asha Coorlawala

Between January 8 and May 9, 1926, as part of their eighteen-month tour of the Orient, the Denishawn Dance Company performed over one hundred dance concerts in India.[1] These performances by Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, and eight dancers were not subsidized by any government, but basically were supported by the sale of tickets and occasionally by royal patrons, such as the Nizam of Hyderabad and the Maharaja Gaekwar of Baroda. The Denishawn dance concerts were presented in theatres in Calcutta, Bombay, Karachi, Quetta, Lahore, Cawnpore, Lucknow, Delhi, Jubbulpore, Allahabad, Secunderabad, and Madras. There is no question that the Denishawn tour in India was successful and popular since it was extended considerably beyond their expectations, and they returned to cities they had already visited. Rave notices from the local press are cited in Ruth St. Denis' autobiography and in Jane Sherman's extensive descriptions of the tour and Denishawn repertory, based on her diaries and recollections.[2]

Both Ted Shawn and Walter Terry stated that St. Denis' visit to India in 1926 with the Denishawn Company was catalytic: it rekindled interest and pride in India's now flourishing dance forms. Terry, for example, said that "Ruth St. Denis' non-authentic Indian dance helped reawaken the subcontinent's slumbering dance art and [was]

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at least partially responsible for the renascence of India's respect for its 2,000 year old heritage."[3] If claims such as this are valid, then why is so little known about this influence in India today? Apparently Ruth St. Denis' nonauthentic impressions of Indian dance were indeed a great triumph in India. She was hailed by the *Times of India* with "rapturous applause and genuine enthusiasm."[4] Her *Dance of the Black and Gold Sari* provoked virtual riots. Yet today, most dancers in India are unfamiliar with her name, whereas Pavlova, who also visited India within a year of St. Denis, is recalled in reverential tones. Rukmini Devi (the founder of Kalakshetra, a prototypical institution for perpetuating traditional dance) insisted that only Pavlova can be credited with the pivotal contribution to India's rediscovery of its own dance forms.[5] Only the dance historians Mohan Khokar and Sunil Kothari have acknowledged India's interest in St. Denis' Indian dances and the Denishawn trip.[6]

In Europe and the United States, St. Denis' dances had drawn accolades from the artistic and cultivated Indians who traveled, including the musician Inayat Khan, the philosopher Ananda Coomaraswamy, the political activist and poet Sarojini Naidu, and the Maharajas of Kapurthala and Cooch-Bihar. However, the noted patron of the arts, Jamshed Bhabha, recalls that when as a little boy he was taken to see the Denishawn dancers at the Excelsior Theatre in Bombay, the show was vaudevillian, inconsequential kitsch—and in this opinion he is not alone.[7]

Puzzling discrepancies emerge also from historical and biographical accounts of the state of Indian dance in the early twentieth century. Pavlova (with her husband, Victor Dandré), Shawn, St. Denis, and Sherman all indicate that the Indian dances were debased and the pure art-dance was all but extinct.[8] But these views of a deteriorated dance do not correspond with those of present-day dancers and dance scholars in India, who insist that traditional Indian dance forms (whether classified as classical or folk) continued to exist in an unbroken traditional lineage throughout the bleak cultural doldrums of the late nineteenth through early twentieth centuries.[9]

Could it be that these divergent perceptions are the result of some fascinating unrecognized undercurrents? Between the national chauvinism or condescending paternalism of the writers of history and the personal egotism of individual performers, is it possible to

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Ruth St. Denis in *The Dance of the Black and Gold Sari* in 1922.
By courtesy of Jane Sherman.

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Ruth St. Denis in the costume for *Radha*, executing a typical *nautch* turn. By courtesy of the Dance Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

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extricate a balanced and fair evaluation of what really happened when Ruth St. Denis visited India fifty years ago?

Shawn, St. Denis, and the young dancer Jane Sherman all recorded their frustration at searching all over India for authentic *nautch*. St. Denis notes how, after much seeking, the meeting with a "Nautch" dancer finally came about in Calcutta:

> Today our good friend, Mr. Jenkins, secretary to the Governor General, has sleuthed down a couple of Nautch girls. It seems there are still some in captivity; but none of them have been visible to the naked eye, and we have come seven thousand miles to see them, we think it is time we got a glimpse of one.[10]

When they finally met the dancer, Bachwa Jan, her salon, with its French chandeliers, proved anything but a cage![11] Further, she sported an imported Parisian sari with "native edging," and "at least fifty thousand dollars worth of jewels." Sherman (who was then in her mid-teens) perceived her as "an ugly old hag in her sixties, who did very little dancing in our sense of the word," but the more experienced St. Denis was enraptured. From Sherman's descriptions it can be deduced that Bachwa Jan presented *thaat* (elaborations of delicate wrist and facial gestures), *abhinaya* (expressive portrayal), a suggestion of *tatkar* (rhythmic footwork), and *tukde* (combinations of rhythmic footwork, hand movements, and turns).[12]

In addition, a 16mm film recorded by Shawn during this tour shows tawdry *nautch* dancers whose performances lacked complexity, clarity, or emotional depth.[13] The film includes clips of a *tamasha* dancer in *gagra* (circular skirt) and *choli* (tie-blouse), presenting different *gat bhav* (expressive and stylized ways of walking), apparently in the Shalimar Gardens, the Lavani/Kathak style of *nautch* at the palace of the Maharaja of Kashmir, and an even briefer glimpse of two boys dressed as women dancing street *nautch* in Quetta.

However, all the current books on Indian dance point out that the complexity and variety of the choreography and styles visible today could only result from a long period of continuous evolution. Numerous examples are cited of genealogies of great teachers and highly proficient performers of the various classical forms to support this argument for a continuous tradition. For example, the present-day format of the Bharata Natyam program is attributed to four brothers who were

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The Denishawn Dancers in their *nautch* ballet *In a Bunnia Bazaar*, choreographed by Ruth St. Denis in 1926, following the tour of the Orient. Back row: Anne Douglas, Pauline Lawrence, Geordie Graham, and Ernestine Day; center: Jane Sherman; foreground: Edith James. The costumes were made for them in Bombay. By courtesy of Jane Sherman.

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musician-choreographers or nattuvanaars at the court of the Maratha ruler Sarfoji II (1789–1831). Similarly, in the north the Lucknow *gharana* of Kathak is said to have flowered under the patronage of the Nawab of Oudh, Wajjid Ali Shah, who continued to support Kathak even after he was deported to Calcutta in 1856 by the British, who annexed his kingdom, and until his death in 1887. The lineage of the Lucknow *gharana*, as the style that emerged out of Wajjid Ali Shah's court is now called, can be traced to three generations preceding the dancers in Wajjid Ali Shah's court. This style of dance is presently performed by Birju Maharaj, India's most acclaimed Kathak performer, and his many students.[14]

If complex technical and highly evolved aesthetic forms existed continuously, why was it so difficult for the Denishawn dancers to locate dancers of quality? Were they being deliberately misinformed by their British and Indian hosts? Their perceptions are, however, borne out by one local eyewitness at the Denishawn performances for the Nizam in Hyderabad: my grandmother recalled that the foreign dancers wished to see Indian dancing, but their Indian hosts were too embarrassed by their local *nautch* and felt that there was nothing worth showing. Nevertheless, the hindsight offered by present-day information has shown that this was not the case.

Thus, in the village of Kuchipudi, also in Hyderabad state, a different tradition of dance was even then being actively performed and perpetuated by men dancing as female dancers in order to retain the land given to them in 1678 by the Nawab of Golkonda (the last of the Qutb Shahi monarchs). However, this dance was an integrated part of the life and rituals of the performers, and like many of the traditional forms, it was not perceived as art fit for cultural presentation. It was only after the 1940s that such dances came to be performed outside their social and geographic locales and urban Indians learned about their existence.[15]

Consequently, it is unlikely that the Denishawn dancers or other European visitors could ever have come across this dance. According to accounts of early English settlers of the nineteenth century, who much preceded Denishawn and Pavlova in India, *nautch* dances had been shown as entertainment to all male European visitors, who were enraptured by the dances and the dancers for their refinement, glamour, and modesty of dress. Lt. Thomas Bacon—a British army officer in

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the early nineteenth century—has left a detailed description of performances, costumes, and ornaments. The description reveals fascination and condescending admiration for the presentation of human feelings by *nautch* dancers, which "I have more than once seen depicted with a truth we could hardly expect from them."[16]

Gradually, a complex picture emerges from the apparently discrepant perceptions of Western visitors, colonial Indians, and present-day historians of Indian dance. Western visitors were shown only the *nautchwalis*, who danced exclusively for male audiences and performed a shadow of degenerated forms of Kathak in North India and *sadir* in the south. In both these traditions, the women dancers had come to be debased performers. More than their dance, it was their persons that were of interest to their patrons, and except for a few admirable exceptions, their movements had come to reflect this.[17] Simultaneously, however, male exponents of the Kathak *gharanas*, most notably Achhan Maharaj, were performing for indigenous patrons in the courts of the various Nawabs and Rajahs of North India, particularly Raja Chakradar Singh of Raigarh. In their case, the dance form itself was on display, rather than their sexual persons, and perhaps this is why they have come to be regarded today as the possessors of the traditions and—unlike the women performers—regarded with reverence as gurus (here, dance teachers) and for their mastery of their art.

One of the reasons for this confusion may be linguistic. In Indian culture the word "dance" has many different connotations and these are indicated by different words. Nautch is the Anglicized pronunciation and transliteration of a Hindi word, *naach*, and was construed by foreigners and many Indians at that time to mean dance generically—any dance—classical, folk, or popular. The word *nautch* could also refer to street dancers, whose dance was only a thin pretext for prostitution, or to high-class courtesans (*ganika*, *tawaif*), such as Bachwa Jan, who took pride in their artistic accomplishments. It was also used in reference to the *devadasis*—women from different backgrounds who were dedicated at a very early age to dance exclusively in temples, as in Orissa; they were a separate tradition. Bringing all these together in a single word, *nautch*, the distinctions were glossed over and dance itself was branded immoral.[18]

Amrit Srinivasan's recent thorough sociological study concurs with this blurring of distinctions in the context of the *devadasi* com-

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The Denishawn Dancers pose in a deserted eleventh-century temple near Jubbulpore: Geordie Graham, Pauline Lawrence, Mary Howry, Ernestine Day (kneeling), Doris Humphrey, Anne Douglas, Jane Sherman (kneeling), and Edith James. Photograph by B. St. Denis. By courtesy of Jane Sherman.

munity of Tamilnadu and its recent history.[19] She shows that these women had held a privileged status in the political, commercial, and cultural life of the community until the end of the nineteenth century, when their trade had become associated with immoral traffic in women and children. This general perception was the result, she finds, of the active political propagation of moral reforms and social purity based on "objective and scientific" evidence of administrators, missionaries, women's rights activists, and doctors, many of whom were part of the British government. For example, medical publications on the physiological repercussions of such practices as early marriage were widely circulated and attracted the public's attention.

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The irony of the situation is that in England, women activists seeking to counter the social, legal, and political injustices to women were pitted in both Houses of Parliament against formidable resistance to very similar reforms. The concerns that effected the change in status of the *devadasis* reflected identical concerns of British women activists, such as reforms to raise the age of consent for girls (from thirteen to twenty-one) and exposing infanticide and the sexual abuse of very young girls. Only a few years before the institution of *devadasis* was attacked, young girls certified as virgins by Harley Street doctors were being sold for £5.[20]

Katherine Mayo's book *Mother India* (published in 1927, the year following the Denishawn tour), and the controversy it generated, provides an example of how British imperialistic attitudes and issues of male dominance were conflated.[21] By demonstrating the need for such reforms, the enlightened rulers were also demonstrating that Indian men who treat their women so abominably can scarcely be trusted to govern themselves. The success of such strategies is evident in Paul Thomas' statement in his *Women and Marriage in India*, published in English in London as late as 1939: "Nobody but the hopelessly prejudiced would deny that the average twentieth-century Englishman is a superior animal to the average Indian."[22] This British attitude was reflected in the self-denigrating attitude of the liberal intellectual and upper-class Indians who were embarrassed by having to perceive their hitherto unquestioned heritage through the biases of their imperial rulers.

Thus, an unusual combination of circumstances had brought about the perception that the living *devadasi* was exploited because of the "irrational" custom of dedicating her person and services at a very young age to the temple/sponsor. The sociohistoric complexity of the structure that enabled the *devadasi* to devote herself to perfecting her art was ignored and an active campaign to discredit her was launched. Colonized reformers had acquired a deep conviction that somewhere a "pure" custom had been polluted and must be cleansed. The anti-*nautch* position was seen as "either consciousness-raising or brainwashing," depending on one's point of view.[23]

Eventually, this collapsing of morals and art into a monolithic issue by the anti-*nautch* movement was fiercely opposed by E. Krishna Iyer, a Brahmin who drew attention to the beauty of the dance form

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and the role of the *devadasis* in preserving and perpetuating the classical aesthetic traditions. From 1927 onward he actively crusaded for the appreciation and rehabilitation of the *sadir* form.

To look forward for a moment, this debate attracted much attention in local newspapers in Madras. Some argued that raising the age of consent to over fourteen for extramarital cases was unfair to the *devadasis*, as by this age they would be too old to be properly trained in the dance—and this amounted to the state's denial of their public professional rights, while the Brahmins who were involved in running the temples saw the same act as State interference. The non-Brahmin Backward Classes, disgruntled by the educational and professional advantages gained by the pro-*nautch* Brahmins, and the Untouchables/Depressed classes under British legislation which deliberately fostered casteism, joined the anti-*nautch* campaign to gain support for their own political ends.*

This comprehensive group included male members within the *devadasi* community, who participated in performances as musicians and teachers. These persons resented the wealth and social prestige that *devadasi* women attracted so effectively because of their feminine charms, and felt that their own artistic contributions were slighted in the process.

Finally, Bill No. 5—put forward by Dr. Muthulaxmi Reddy, herself a reformist, nondancing member of the same community—was approved in 1930 by the Madras legislative assembly.[24] *Devadasis* were absolved of their services to the temples and their material interests were protected through land grants. Much later, the Madras Devadasis Act of 1947 was passed by the Congress Ministry in Madras in free India, abolishing temple dedications so that marriage became legally valid for all women of the Melakkarar/Isai Vellalla (*devadasi*) community. However, by this time the anti-*nautch* movement had already

*The term "Backward Classes" distinguishes this non-Brahmin group from the landed, politically active "Forward non-Brahmin Classes," who comprised the Justice Party and enacted many reforms. The Depressed Classes refers to the "Untouchables." All these terms are used by Amrit Srinivasan ("Temple 'Prostitution' and Reform," p. 45), who reflects the terms found in the various *Imperial Census Reports* of 1871–1931 and the *Manuals* or *Gazetteers* for the various districts that were brought out as late as the early twentieth century.

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The Denishawn Dancers in the deserted temple near Jubbulpore, posed as Indian women returning home with their filled *lotas* or water jugs: Ernestine Day, Pauline Lawrence, Doris Humphrey, Geordie Graham, Mary Howry, Anne Douglas, Edith James, and Jane Sherman. Photograph by B. St. Denis. By courtesy of the Dance Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

deprived the women artists of their independent prestige, respect, and rights to property inheritance.[25]

What was achieved by the bill was to clear the way for non-*devadasi* women from respectable families to study dance. The reconstruction of the *sadir* dance was undertaken by Westernized and Sanskritized Brahmins, notably Rukmini Devi Arundale. *Sadir* was reclaimed as Bharata Natyam, the purest and most "authentic" traditional dance of the Natya Shastra, effectively shifting the focus of the dance from the living tradition to texts. Beginning around 1940, many *devadasis* had moved on to careers in the cinema, where the inhibition against higher-caste girls was still in effect. Srinivasan's well-documented account of the complex issues around the anti-*nautch* movement in one southern province of India illuminates the nature of related agitations that occurred in several states more or less concurrently. Frédérique Apffel Marglin's study of the *devadasis* of Orissa

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does not focus on the anti-*nautch* movement, but she does refer to anti-*nautch* sentiments being expressed in the *Madura Mail* on November 3, 1894.[26]

However, it was in 1926, before the pro-*nautch* campaign had been launched but in the midst of all the agitations concerning women's bodies, that St. Denis and the Denishawn dancers—innocently outside the symbiotic and hierarchical complexities of relationships of colonizer and colonized—made their public appearances all over India and sought out the *nautch* dancers whom they believed were of the same ilk as the *devadasis*.

In order to reconstruct how the Denishawn company was received by audiences in India, it is necessary to recall the aesthetic context in which their dancing bodies were presented. (The dances that Denishawn presented in India have been listed by Christena Schlundt and Jane Sherman and on a program of the performances in Secunderabad for the Nizam which was also seen by my grandmother.) [27] A typical program opened with several of the short abstract dances by St. Denis known as "Music Visualizations," of which she had earlier written that "music visualization in its purest form is the scientific translation into bodily action of the rhythmic, melodic and harmonious structure of a musical composition, without intention to in any way interpret or reveal any hidden meaning apprehended by the dancer."[28]

Shawn's *Voices of Spring* followed with its striking opening tableau based on Botticelli's *La Primavera* of figures of Greek mythology, the movements of the various characters evoking the dreamy, melancholy air of Botticelli's famous painting. The girls were dressed in short tunics with bare legs. Then came a series of dances mostly choreographed by Shawn that drew their inspiration from a variety of cultures, such as *Cuadro Flamenco*, the American Indian *Invocation to the Thunderbird*, a suite of sketches about the American cowboy, the Hawaiian *Legend of Pelée*, and St. Denis' *Japanese Flower Arrangements*. India was represented by her *Dance of the Apsarases* and *Nautch*. The program concluded with a jointly choreographed suite of dances based on Egyptian legends.[29]

Indian audiences watching these varied impressionistic sketches must have been curious to see how their own culture would be repre-

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Ruth St. Denis in *Nautch* in the 1920s. By courtesy of the Mohan Khokar Collection.

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sented. In Europe at that time, Indian and Asian dance was deemed so different from the European that its aesthetic concepts lay beyond the Western individual's comprehension and could therefore be ignored. This often resulted in a collapsing together of diverse cultural images. However, in the case of St. Denis' *Nautch*, Ahmed Alley of *The Rangoon Daily News* was delighted to congratulate her for discerning the difference between Indian and Egyptian dance movements:

> The Indian Nautch, with Miss St. Denis and the Denishawn dancers, was a brilliant presentation, and deserves the fullest credit. The costuming was replete with a wealth of detail, that reminded one of the Nautch girls of Lucknow and Agra. Miss Denis [*sic*] is assuredly the greatest Western exponent of Indian dancing that one has yet seen in the East. . . . So often has the Indian dance been confused with the Egyptian movements by Western dancers who have visited the East, that it is a pleasure to witness the typically Indian dance which is performed by Miss St. Denis and her troupe. . . . A more faithful representation of Indian dancing has probably seldom if ever been seen here.[30]

Perhaps the local aesthetes were also flattered that Indian dance had indeed been represented in a superior context (i.e., within the frames of colonialist taste). Jane Sherman recalls that whereas the colonials seated in the front rows seemed to like all the dances, a definite and different response of excitement would arise when she was performing the *Dance of the Apsarases*, the first dance on the program with Indian content.[31] It is consistently documented that of the dances in the Denishawn repertory that were performed in India, *The Dance of the Black and Gold Sari* and *Nautch*, seem to have conflagrated the most excitement.[32] Doris Humphrey, who was one of the dancers on this tour, is quoted as exclaiming:

> Well, it's plain to be seen what kind of a program the Denishawns have to give in India. First Miss Ruth does four Black and Gold Saris. Then she rests a while and does at least six Nautches. After that we all can go home![33]

Both *Nautch* and *The Dance of the Black and Gold Sari* have been well described by Sherman and others, but a recent viewing of the actual films of Ruth St. Denis performing these dances (albeit at

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an advanced age) contributed several insights as to how these dances might have been received in India in the 1920s. They recreate a personal vision of India that both contradicts and confirms the legend and mystique of "Miss Ruth."

There seem to have been many versions of the *Nautch*, varying according to the costume, the music, and the event.[34] For example, two distinct *Nautch* dances were recorded on silent black-and-white film by Carol Lynn at Jacob's Pillow in 1949 and 1950, respectively.[35] The *White Nautch* shows St. Denis in a white *gagra*, *choli*, and *chunni* (long veil draped on the head and upper torso) worn in the North Indian way, except for the billowing ruffled petticoats under the *gagra*. The movements are lyrical, with stylized stances, rhythmic footwork with ankle bells, spiraling hand and wrist movements—all of which seem vaguely to recall both Flamenco and Kathak dance. Inspired by the *nautch* dancer that St. Denis had seen at Coney Island, this dance does evoke her fascination with the atmosphere and qualities of the event. St. Denis performs *attami* (horizontal head and neck movements) with the *chaddar* held behind her head. The dance ends with skirt manipulations, a *salaam*, and a retreat. This beautifully performed dance seems most closely to fit descriptions of St. Denis' first version of the *Nautch*, as premiered in the Ronacher Theatre in Vienna in February 1908.

Even as St. Denis glamorized the *nautch* with her lyrical presentation of it, she did not romanticize the plight of the *nautch* dancers. In *Nautch in Authentic Costume*, the second dance in Lynn's film, St. Denis wears a *gagra-choli* of western India and appears to assume some of the attributes of street performers, mumbling and soliciting *baksheesh* (alms) and turning away in disdain when refused by an imaginary passerby. This sympathetic and still elegant portrayal of the *nautch* dancer seems to indicate her revised perception of these dancers. Perhaps this is a later version, following her trip to India, for it draws attention to the contradictions between the original religious intent of the dance and its debased circumstances. Suzanne Shelton's observation that as she grew older St. Denis added theatrical touches to this and other dances would seem to confirm this possibility.[36] Although her stage persona was inspirational, St. Denis' espousal of the pro-*nautch* stance, and this display of women's bodies set against the background of Indian culture, particularly in *Nautch* and *Sari*, must

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have aroused controversy or at least stimulated people in the audience to reexamine their assumptions about dancing women. If La Meri's visit to India a few years later, in the 1930s, is seen from this perspective, then it follows inevitably that the British women requested La Meri to omit the Indian dances from her public performances.[37]

In three films of *The Dance of the Black and Gold Sari*, the choreography is consistent except for minor variations in performance phrasing and two alternate endings.[38] Apparently, St. Denis constructed her dances meticulously, but then allowed herself to vary phrasing and interpretations according to her mood and the audience.

The Dance of the Black and Gold Sari was intended to show a humble shopgirl showing a rich sari to an imaginary patron, putting it on to demonstrate it, and becoming temporarily transfigured with the joy of showing it off. The sari carried in St. Denis' arms is thrown onto the floor with a ringmaster's flourish; then in a few adept moves St. Denis wraps it around herself, turning her back to the audience as she forms the pleats. To the surprise of an Indian viewer, even now, St. Denis flings the *pallav* (ornately patterned endpiece of the sari) on the floor and straddles it with a movement that evokes the image of a cowgirl mounting a horse. In the next instant, this same garment-as-horse is transformed into a resplendent train as St. Denis poses Javanese style, with her arm magnificently hyperextended at the elbow, drawing attention to the parallel sweep of the fabric curving from her shoulder to the floor.

Perhaps a Western observer can more easily appreciate the way this dance explores the visual and dramatic possibilities of six yards of sensuous fabric. Despite this admirable intention, the three filmed performances (and also the live recreation on the Joyce Trisler Danscompany) even now startle postcolonial Indian sensibilities: these images, frozen from another era in celluloid, show a knock-kneed woman stagger on stage in what is considered underwear by Indian standards. Watching this dance is comparable to watching a strip act backwards.

In India, the sari epitomizes an ideal of womanhood which has for centuries been continuously fed and overlaid with associations, from Sita, the role-model of Indian womanhood from the Ramayana (ca. 100 B.C.E.–500 C.E.), to present-day fashion models displaying the latest designer saris in the five-star hotels. St. Denis' dance violates, exploits, and loves this ideal with all the innocence and ambivalence

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of a dreamstruck tourist. (In fact, the dance had been choreographed before St. Denis came to India. She had learned to wear a sari from the Bhumgara family, who owned a store of Indian exports in New York.)

A problem endemic to intercultural performance (even within the same generation) is that one group never sees the performance in the same way as "the other." Deborah Jowitt points out that many saw in this dance a woman gradually becoming transfigured by the splendor of the garment.[39] A Calcutta newspaper review of 1926 supports this view: "*The Dance of the Black and Gold Sari* is as beautiful as it is enchanting. She has not only caught the Indian spirit, she is experiencing the joy of the spirit: and she is imparting that joy to her spectators."[40] However, it must be pointed out that in 1926, newspapers in English, including the *Times of India*, were run by British colonials, and their views did not necessarily reflect popular responses by Indians.

Imagine performances of *The Dance of the Black and Gold Sari* in India when antagonistic political and personal investments were converging on the issue of the dancing woman's body! The mere physical presence of the attractive St. Denis, not-quite-dressed, added to that of the other very young ladies cavorting barelegged in tunics must have been far more startling then; when the films are seen today, the image is distanced both by the medium itself and by changes in our sensibilities. Although reviews show that St. Denis' sensual chasteness and liberational ideas about woman and dance were warmly appreciated, her dances could not but be perceived through the acquired layers of Islamic and Victorian morality overlaid on deeper, suppressed, traditional sensibilities.

Sherman herself concurs that as the tour continued, the possibility gradually dawned on her that the tumultuous reception that this dance was accorded in India could have been because the audiences were excited to see a white woman on stage, in public, and dressed uncharacteristically. Sherman recalls that although all the best seats in the houses were occupied by colonials, who were delighted to see some Western art-dance (traveling conditions were hard and performing groups from the West were a rare phenomenon),[41] the balconies and seats at the back were filled by the Indian population, whose con-

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Rabindranath Tagore and Ruth St. Denis meeting in the United States in the winter of 1930. By courtesy of the Dance Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

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cerns during that time involved strong and mixed feelings of inferiority and also resentment against the British.

It is likely that St. Denis did, as claimed, stimulate people in India to think afresh about their own heritage. St. Denis' *Nautch* demonstrated that a socially undesirable ritual could be presented on a public stage as a form of art, and so preceded the preoccupation of many Indian choreographers with presenting themes about regressive social customs. For me, the intimate and devotional feeling that suffused St. Denis' danced *puja* (act of worship) titled *Incense* remains deeply moving, but unfortunately this dance was not on the Denishawn program in India. Reviews and events indicate that St. Denis very deeply moved and also startled a vast public with short-lived memories, but she did not directly inspire any protégées in India to perpetuate or glorify her contribution. Rabindranath Tagore requested in vain that she remain in India and teach at Visva-Bharati, his university in Calcutta. Many other social and political factors, including Independence, also contributed to rekindling India's pride in its now flourishing dance forms. Vallathol, Tagore, Rukmini Devi, and the many who followed them effectively revitalized the local forms and brought them to the theatres in the cities, where they had not previously been seen.

Pavlova, however, directly inspired three of the moving forces in the revival of Indian dance. She apparently met Rukmini Devi Arundale socially on a luxury liner somewhere between Australia and London, and urged her to study Indian dance.[42] So it came about that Rukmini Devi studied *sadir*, which she later renamed Bharata Natyam and performed in public. This Brahmin lady—married to the British head of the Theosophical Society, Lord Arundale— founded the institution of dance called Kalakshetra in Madras, and respectable young girls flocked to study an art that was revalidated by its disassociation from the *devadasis*. This is seen as a pivotal act in Indian dance history, so that Rukmini Devi is considered one of the three prime movers in the renaissance of Indian dance, along with the poet Vallathol and the dancer Uday Shankar. It is now understandable that Rukmini Devi, with her concern for propriety, preferred not to acknowledge the art of St. Denis, for it highlighted the stigma that Rukmini Devi was to "purge" from the dance even as it was being renamed a national art—"Bharata" means India.[43] When Pavlova's performances in India

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followed those of Denishawn a year later, her art was not controversial. She brought to India the ethereal impact of her *Dying Swan*, which corresponded with the spiritual image that Indian reconstructionists were claiming for their own art forms.

During her visit to India, Pavlova also influenced Leela Sokhey, a young and beautiful socialite, to study Kathak seriously. Sokhey went on to perform under a stage name, Menaka, and her theatrical Indian dance productions were highly acclaimed in Europe and India. Already in 1922 Pavlova had invited a young Indian art student to perform the role of Krishna in her new "Indian" ballet and to choreograph two dances, *Krishna and Radha* and *A Hindu Wedding*. She thus deliberately instigated Uday Shankar's switch from preparing for a career in art to his path-breaking and momentous career in dance.[44]

Perhaps St. Denis' real and persistent effect on the revival of Indian dance was indirect: she brought this ethos to the awareness of a vast public outside India in a way that audiences could easily understand. In all the visual arts and literature, Orientals—the Eastern cultures that fall between the Suez Canal and the Pacific Ocean—were perceived as the superior possessors of ancient wisdoms, while treated as inferior peoples, ignorant of the power inherent in the new knowledge systems of scientific development and industrialization. Even the generous Pavlova could not help expressing herself in the power-oriented thought of her culture: "The East had always fascinated me. One of the greatest ambitions remaining to me was to subjugate the Orient to my art, proving its power over people of any race or color."[45]

St. Denis, however, seems to have avoided the trap of the dominant ethos. In the entry in her diary for November 23, 1926, at the end of the long tour of the Orient, she evaluates the confrontation between her romanticized ideals and the reality:

> I had dreamed of India long, lived in the essence of her wisdom and beauty, seen through the soul of her artists so continually that it was a perilous thing to put these dreams to the test—these marvelous and fantastic dreams which I had built up in my own mind, and had already to some degree expressed in my Indian dances.
>
> I am beginning to see that I already possessed the soul of India right here in America, through the medium of the language of her artists; that the India I had adored . . . no longer existed—or rather it existed now for me much more intensely in the depth of my own spirit than in . . . the politicians shouting in the assemblies or in the mobs silently re-

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> sisting the government. . . . A curious truth is beginning to dawn on me: I see that I was sent to the Orient to give a truth as well as receive one.[46]

During St. Denis' solo career, from 1906 to 1915, she had created several dances of these visions of India. Her dances were unashamedly inauthentic; they reflected her own personality by combining down-to-earth pragmatism with philosophizing, sensuality with chaste saintliness. Her lively and personalized *nautch* dances differed greatly from the sentimental, idealized "vestal virgins" of Indian temples, who sacrificed themselves for spirituality and love in Delibes' opera *Lakmé* and Petipa's ballet *La Bayadère*. The choreography and the movement in her dances *Incense* and *Yogi* are extremely simple, but the dances communicate her absorption with the Indian philosophical and devotional ethos. In *The Cobras*, she wears long black gloves with sparkly "eyes" sewn onto them, and thus transforms her hands into snakes. This dance of the hands hovers between the eccentric and the amazing. Yet, although St. Denis' dances about India transcended the Orientalist vision of her time because of her personal and sincere involvement with the subjects she portrayed, they still created another kind of Orientalist vision.

It was St. Denis who first aestheticized Indian dance for a new public of Europe and the United States, which continued for generations to look at Indian dance through glasses initially tinted by St. Denis' vision. St. Denis' early dances preceded Pavlova's work with Uday Shankar in Europe by seventeen years.[47] That Pavlova admired St. Denis' dances can be deduced from the fact that she included them in her own concert program, presented around England; Deborah Jowitt points out that an Incense Dance, a Nautch Dance, and a Hindu Snake Dance were performed on this program by a dancer named Roshanara, and clippings about these performances were found in St. Denis' own scrapbook.[48]

Although St. Denis cannot be credited with directly and singlehandedly reviving India's esteem of its own dances, she did serve and propagate a positive image of Indian dance forms outside India. In 1962, Ram Gopal, who made his career in London, acknowledged her contribution to the British public's awareness of Indian dance in his article "Eastern Dances for Western Dancers" in *The Dancing Times*, while Shirada Narghis, writing for *Dance Magazine* in August 1945, also praised her work along with that of a later American admirer of

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Ruth St. Denis in *The Incense*. By courtesy of the Mohan Khokar Collection.

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Ruth St. Denis in her *Tagore Poem*, choreographed in 1929 and photographed some years later by Marcus Blechman. By courtesy of Jane Sherman.

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Indian dance: "Ruth St. Denis, by her life-long devotion to the philosophic depth and import of Indian's dance, and La Meri by her technical faithfulness are perpetuating in America the high standards of a carefully evolved art."[49]

Together, St. Denis and Ted Shawn, with his organizational talent, and also La Meri created a place for Indian dance influences in the American educational system. At Jacob's Pillow, every performance was programmed with equal time for classical ballet, modern dance, and a national art-dance form. In order to educate audiences who saw all the classical art-dances of non-Western cultures as folk dances, La Meri coined the term "ethnic dance" to stand for the art-dances. Gradually, this "ethnic dance"* was introduced into the curriculum of many of the American institutions of higher education with dance programs.

Following St. Denis, Pavlova, and Uday Shankar, many other dancers performing in Europe (like Ram Gopal, Mrinalini Sarabhai, and Ragini Devi) and in the United States (including La Meri, Matteo, and Bashkar) paid more attention to authentic technique. Yet, for several generations, St. Denis' vision remained the initial yardstick of what is "Indian" and then "pseudo-Indian" for the generations that followed.

Say that Indian dance is an image reflected in two mirrors opposite each other—the "East" and "West." As the image multiplies into many variations of itself, it becomes impossible to determine which mirror it is in. When one image exclusively is selected, it usually reflects the perspective and image of the one who is looking.

In a series of expanding repercussions and dialogues between India and the "West," each exchange modifies and influences the following one. Audiences abroad consistently expect to see an ancient (read "beyond criticism"), timeless (read "unchanging"), mysterious (read "incomprehensible"), spiritual, beautiful, ecstatic, complex art form. Even now, the dances that India exports to the West are selected (by both Western and Indian impresarios) as they correspond

*Although use of this term is now deemed "politically incorrect" because it implies that the dance so designated is of a subordinate culture, the term has come to represent that which it was designed to refute.

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to Western concepts of what Indian dance should be. In India, this process is legitimized by its rewards: performances abroad, acclaim, and a sense of self defined against the Western "other." Dancers acclaimed outside India return to a new level of acceptance and respect for their art within India, where dance is perceived as epitomizing the highest values of Indian culture. The accrued acclaim from international exposures provides dignity to the sense of self of a battered nation emerging from centuries of economic and cultural exploitation.

The visions and expectations of non-Indian presenters, whose first formative and definitive concepts of Indian dance were gleaned from the Indian presentations of St. Denis, continue to function as self-fulfilling prophecies. In this way, the influence of her original vision lingers, both in the external reflection and in the internal processes.

Acknowledgment

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Notes

1. Christena Lundberg Schlundt, *The Professional Appearances of Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn: A Chronology and Index of Dances 1906–1932* (New York: The New York Public Library, 1962).
2. Ruth St. Denis, *An Unfinished Life: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1939; rpt. Dance Horizons, 1971); Jane Sherman, *Soaring: The Diary and Letters of a Denishawn Dancer in the Far East 1925–1926* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1976).
3. Walter Terry, *The Saturday Review*, December 3, 1975.
4. *Times of India* (Bombay), quoted in "Denishawn in the East," an article in *The Dancing Times*, 1927, p. 472.

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5. Suzanne Shelton, *Divine Dancer: A Biography of Ruth St. Denis* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), p. 199.
6. Sunil Kothari, "History, Roots, Growth and Revival," *Bharata Natyam: Indian Classical Dance Art* (Bombay: Tata Press, 1979), p. 24; Mohan Khokar, "Dance in Transition, The Pioneers," *Marg Trends and Transitions in Indian Art*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2. Ed. Saryu V. Doshi (Bombay: Tata Press, 1984), pp. 44–9; Carmen Kagal, "Indian Interlude in Modern Dance," *Span* (New Delhi: United States Information Agency, undated). Sunil Kothari does not credit St. Denis with inspiring a renaissance of interest in Indian dance in his reference to this visit. Mohan Khokar and Carmen Kagal refer to the Indian element and influence in Ruth St. Denis' work, but not to its impact on Indian dance.
7. Interviews and discussions with Jamshed J. Bhabha, Bombay House, Bombay, 1975 and February 1989. J.J. Bhabha is the Honorary Director for the National Center for Performing Arts, Bombay, and serves on various national and international committees on subjects related to Indian art.
8. Keith Money, *Pavlova* (New York: Knopf, 1982), p. 312; Ted Shawn, *Gods Who Dance* (New York: Dutton, 1929), p. 133; St. Denis, *Unfinished Life*, p. 287; Maureen Fleming, "An Interview with Ruth St. Denis," *The Dancing Times*, 1926; Sherman, *Soaring*, p. 99.
9. Kapila Vatsyayan, "Esthetic Theories Underlying Asian Performing Arts" (Unpublished manuscript, 1984), p. 2; Dr. Narayan Menon, interview with author, January 27, 1989. See also Kothari, *Bharata Natyam*, and his *Kathak* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1989), pp. 1–82.
10. St. Denis, *Unfinished Life*, p. 286.
11. In the legalized houses of prostitution in Bombay, services are rendered in chambers partitioned with bars.
12. Sherman, *Soaring*, p. 99.
13. Ted Shawn, *Denishawn Dancers in India* (Film: 16mm, silent, black-and-white, 6 min. 1926).
14. Kothari, *Kathak*, p. 37.
15. Kuchipudi is traditionally a dance-drama performed by males only. Today, a reconstructed solo-dance format, as in Bharata Natyam (the prototypical "art dance" of India), is danced by women in urban theatres.

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16. Pran Neville, "The Nautch Girl and The Sahib," *India Magazine* (January 1990), pp. 42–52.
17. Khokar lists some of the exceptions: Balasaraswati, Swarnasaraswati, Varalakshmi, Bhanumati, Jeevaratnam Bhanumati, Jayalakshmi, Pattu, and Saranayaki (*Marg*, p. 70).
18. Frédérique Apffel Marglin, *Wives of the God-King* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). Marglin's research on the *devadasis* of Orissa also confirms that official accounts of this period did not distinguish between the circumstances and levels of artistry of dancing-girl prostitutes, *nautch*-women, and the *devadasis*, who in some parts of India (as in Orissa) still performed only in temples.
19. Amrit Srinivasan, "Temple 'Prostitution' and Reform: An Examination of the Ethnographic, Historical and Textual Content of the Devadasis of Tamilnadu, South India" (Dissertation, Cambridge University, Wolfson College, 1984), pp. 184–216.
20. "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon," in *The Pall Mall Gazette* (London), July 6–12, 1885, was a report on the slave trade of young English girls. Cited in Duncan Crow, *The Victorian Woman* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), pp. 258–68 and referred to in Phillipa Levine, *Victorian Feminism 1850–1900* (London: Hutchinson Press, 1987), pp. 148–51.
21. Katherine Mayo, *Mother India* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1927); Liddle and Joshi, *Daughters of Independence: Caste, Gender and Class in India* (London: Zed Books, Ltd., 1986), pp. 27, 31.
22. Paul Thomas, *Women and Marriage in India* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1939), p. 112.
23. Marglin, *Wives*, p. 8.
24. Nondancing wives in the community were subject to the same stringent regulations as the rest of Indian women concerning education and way of life. Only those women who were considered to have talent and beauty were selected for dedication.
25. Amrit Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XX, No. 44 (November 3, 1985).
26. Marglin, *Wives*, p. 8.
27. Schlundt, *Professional Appearances*; Jane Sherman, *Denishawn: The Enduring Influence* (Boston: Twayne, 1983), pp. 76, 81.

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28. Ruth St. Denis, "Music Visualization," *Denishawn Magazine*, Vol. I, No. 3, Spring 1925.
29. Jane Sherman, *The Drama of Denishawn Dance* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), p. 31.
30. Ahmed Alley, *The Rangoon Daily News*, quoted in St. Denis, *Unfinished Life*, p. 283.
31. Jane Sherman, telephone interview with author, May 5, 1991.
32. Ted Shawn, *One Thousand and One Night Stands* (New York: Doubleday, 1960), p. 188; Doris Humphrey, quoted in St. Denis, *Unfinished Life*, p. 287; Sherman, *Drama*, p. 81. Though not listed on the Secunderabad program, Shawn, Humphrey, Sherman, and St. Denis affirm that *The Dance of the Black and Gold Sari* was performed at practically every performance because of its phenomenal success.
33. St. Denis, *Unfinished Life*, p. 287.
34. The *Green Nautch*, *Palace Nautch*, *White Nautch*, *Street Nautch*, and *Nautch in Authentic Costume* are some of the names by which this dance has been identified. In the film *A Visit with Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn* were two similar versions of the *Nautch in White Costume*, set to the music of the American composer Charles Wakefield Cadman. These dances are longer than those in Carol Lynn's film (see Note 35) and seem to combine the two distinctive versions. Walter Terry differentiates between a *Nautch* that precedes the *Cadman Nautch* and the *Cadman Nautch* itself, which was first performed at The Academy of Lynchburg, Virginia, on May 15, 1922. Terry insists that all her *Nautch* dances are variations of the same dance, and that the different names simply refer to the costume in which it was performed. Walter Terry, *Miss Ruth, The More Living Life of Ruth St. Denis* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1969), p. 70; *A Visit with Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn* (Film: Reuven Frank, NBC-TV, ca. 1960).
35. Carol Lynn, *Ruth St. Denis at Jacob's Pillow, Mass.* (Film: silent, black-and-white, 1949–50): "White Nautch" (1950); "Black and Gold Sari" (1950); "Nautch (in Authentic Costume)" (1949).
36. Shelton, *Divine Dancer*, p. 82.
37. Ibid., p. 199.
38. Lynn, *Ruth St. Denis*; James Baribault, *Ruth St. Denis by Baribault* (Film: sound, color, 1950); William Skipper, *The First Lady of American Dance: Ruth St. Denis* (Film: sound, color, 1956).

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39. Deborah Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image* (New York: William Morrow, 1988), p. 138.
40. Sherman, *Drama*, p. 82.
41. Jane Sherman, interview, May 5, 1991.
42. This took place during Pavlova's tour of Japan and the Far East in 1922.
43. Bharata has a triple meaning: it refers to Bharata, the sage attributed with authorship of the Natya Shastra; the syllable *Bha* is said to stand for *bhava*, *ra* for *raga*, and *ta* for *tala*, supposedly the three main components of this form; it is the Sanskrit name for India.
44. Mohan Khokar, *His Dance, His Life: A Portrait of Uday Shankar* (New Delhi: Himalayan Books, 1983), pp. 29–30.
45. Margot Fonteyn, *Pavlova: Portrait of a Dancer* (New York: Viking Press, 1984), p. 105.
46. St. Denis, *Unfinished Life*, p. 302.
47. In 1906, St. Denis danced *Radha* and *Incense* at the Aldwych Theatre in London, and then went on to perform in Europe that same year. On September 10, 1923, Pavlova opened a season at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, which included the new "Indian" works choreographed by Uday Shankar. Shelton, *Divine Dancer*, pp. 67, 71; Khokar, *His Dance*, pp. 28–9.
48. Jowitt, *Time*, p. 147.
49. Ram Gopal, "Eastern Dances for Western Dancers," *The Dancing Times*, October 1962, p. 16; Shirada Narghis, "India's Dance in America," *Dance Magazine*, August 1945, p. 10.

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